

Azerbaijan: a dual offensive

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Azerbaijan's strategy over the disputed, Armenian-held territory of Karabakh is also aimed at eliminating domestic opposition. But the country's rising troubles make this a self-defeating strategy.

The frontlines between Azerbaijan and Karabakh, as well as with Armenia, are seeing renewed military escalation. The Azerbaijani defence ministry says thirteen Azerbaijani soldiers have died during military operations, while Armenian official sources recognise the [death](#) of five Armenian servicemen.

The [clashes](#) are the most serious since May 1994, when a ceasefire was signed between the three parties and stop military operations in the Karabakh war. The conflict started in the late Soviet years, when the Armenian majority of the Karabakh autonomous region demanded on 21 February 1988 to be [detached](#) from Soviet Azerbaijan and be attached to Soviet Armenia. The Soviet as well as Azerbaijani leadership not only rejected this demand but attempted to repress the popular mobilisation, including via a series of anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijani cities. As the Soviet Union collapsed the two sides fought a war, at the end of which Karabakh Armenian forces supported by Armenia not only controlled Karabakh proper, but also occupied seven surrounding Azerbaijani provinces. An estimated 35,000 people died from all sides of the [conflict](#), while nearly a million people became refugees.

While it is difficult to indicate who initiated the military attacks, they come in a larger context of escalation from the Azerbaijani side. The latest, moreover, serves Azerbaijani political objectives. After years of negotiations under Azerbaijan's then president Heydar Aliiev, his successor (and son) Ilham Aliiev took a [bellicose](#) position on the issue of Karabakh. This was influenced by the completion in 2005 of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which was capable to transport a million barrel of oil per day. Since, Azerbaijani state budget exploded, and so did its military spending, which increased from \$175m dollars in 2003 to over \$3.6bn dollars in 2013. Azerbaijani leaders repeat that their military budget is equal to the entire budget of the Armenian government.

Parallel to the dramatic increase in military expenditure, the Azerbaijani position hardened. The number of military incidents increased on the Karabakh front, as well as along the Armenian-Azerbaijani borders.

The opposition under fire

The latest military escalation on the war-fronts comes in the same moment as a massive attack by Azerbaijani authorities against independent-minded individuals including political experts, human-rights defenders and NGO workers. The latest in a long [series](#) was Arif Yunusov, a sociologist specialising in migration, refugees, Islam and other topics. [Yunusov](#) was arrested on 5 August, accused of collaboration "with representatives of Armenian special services." A few days earlier, Leyla Yunusova his wife and human-rights activist was [arrested](#) with similar charges reminding the glorious days of Joseph Stalin. On 2 August the authorities arrested another human-rights [activist](#),

the 29-year-old Rasul Jafarov, under accusations of “tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, and abuse of authority.”

The Azerbaijani presidential advisor Ali Hasanov made a revealing link between the arrests and the escalation of the conflict, when he commented on the [arrest of Leyla Yunusova](#): “It is clear that there’s an anti-national group within Azerbaijan directed by external forces, with big suspicions of having ties with the Armenian lobby.”

The massive [arrests](#) of opposition figures, journalists and human-rights activists started in early in 2014, parallel with escalation on the frontline. Tofiq Yagublu, deputy chair of the major opposition party *Musavat* was arrested in March and thrown into jail with a seven-year sentence. In April, Turkish authorities arrested Rauf Mirgadirov, an Azerbaijani journalist and writer who was living in Turkey, and deported to Baku where he was immediately arrested and jailed. In July, another human-rights activist and educator from Ganja, Hasan Huseynli, was [condemned](#) to six years’ imprisonment for attacking and “stabbing a man.”

Oddly, Azerbaijan from May-November 2014 [chairs](#) the Council of Europe, the European [institution](#) in charge of democracy and human rights. It suggests that the international political organisations have a sense of humour equal to Samuel Beckett’s theatre of the absurd.

The arrests and intimidations [against](#) all freethinkers in Azerbaijan has taken a massive dimension in the last months. This is not anymore selective intimidation to spread fear and self-censorship among the society. The current wave of repression aims to destroy any independent capacity of the Azerbaijani society to voice critical thinking.

The source of tension

Azerbaijan accuses the Armenian side of being no more than a pawn in the hands of the Kremlin. Yet, in their policies, Baku has done everything possible so that Armenian reliance on Russia does not decrease. For example, in 2008 as Turkey initiated a rapprochement with Armenia, aiming to end its blockade, open the common borders, and establish diplomatic relations, it was the vehement opposition of Azerbaijani officials which resulted in the failure of Turkish diplomatic move.

In 2013, as the European Union was proposing its association project to Armenia, Baku received Vladimir Putin who announced arms contracts of \$4bn dollars to Azerbaijan. This was a clear sign that Putin was angry, and ready to shift the military balance in favour of Azerbaijan, and succeeded in preventing Armenia from joining the European project. Any rapprochement between Armenia with Turkey or the EU would have reduced Armenian reliance on Russia. This time too the tension in the south Caucasus seems likely to help Moscow. The two presidents, Ilham Aliiev and Serzh Sargsyan, travelled to Sochi on 10 August to [meet](#) with the Russian leader; in the aftermath, Russian media are full of reports highlighting Putin’s role in [moderating](#) the dispute, though the only sign of this is that the leaders are quoted in favour of negotiation to sttle the dispute.

Yet the main objective of the Aliiev [regime](#) from the military escalation is internal. In spite of its aggressive discourse, the Azerbaijani administration is torn by similar tensions as the ones which exploded by the Arab spring. Ilham Aliiev came to power in 2003 by transforming a republic into [dynastic](#) rule. The only other such success was in Syria three years earlier when Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father Hafez, and (again like Syria) the Azeri regime is composed of a specific sub-group - the “Nakhichevan clan” - although their group cohesion is nothing to compare with Syrian ruling clan. Azerbaijan has an exploding demography, with youth unemployment a serious issue. The oil revenues are in decline, an omen for times of trouble.

Public dissatisfaction can be measured by the large number of Azeri *jihadis* fighting with ISIS in Syrian and Iraq. This is a new phenomenon; there were almost no Azeri combatants in the Chechnya wars or in Iraq. In 2013, over 200 Azerbaijanis were fighting with *jihadi* formations against the Syrian army, and thirty had died. Entire families, including large numbers of children are moving to the Middle Eastern battlefronts, as videos posted on the internet reveal.

With the emergence of a *salafi-jihadi* [current](#) in Azerbaijan, there is a parallel increase in sectarian tensions. The country has a Shi'a majority with nearly two-third of the population, and a one-third *Sunni* minority, historically marginalised, and originating from the mountainous north of the country. In July, a mob attacked a mosque in Sabirabad in south Azerbaijan, targeting religious *Sunni* Muslims, beating them and forcibly shaving their beards. Few days later *salafis* attacked *Shi'a* believers in a Baku suburb. Azerbaijan, after decades of Soviet atheism, is newly discovering religion, [importing](#) all of its contradictions from neighbouring Middle Eastern countries including sectarian tensions.

The increasing internal repression reflects the Aliev administration's fear. Yet its actions can backfire. The threat to its stability comes neither from Karabakh Armenians nor Azerbaijani civil society. By attacking those two targets Aliev will eventually strengthen *salafi-jihadi* trends; by destroying civil society will disarm the Azerbaijani people against the new danger. In this context, Aliev's choice to deepen the tension over Karabakh hands a further cause to the radicals.

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